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Students' attitudes towards being professionally counselled

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Abstract

One of the objectives of academic courses preparing students for work in the helping professions - such as a social worker, counsellor or coach - is making students develop positive attitudes towards their clients. Equally important is that the students develop positive attitudes towards being helped professionally. This is why the author has decided to research the attitudes displayed by the students of social work and job counselling at the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University (UMCS) towards their own being clients of professional counselling. The results reveal that the students' attitudes are marked with a considerable degree of immaturity and resistance towards being helped by other professionals. The students admit feeling uncomfortable and embarrassed about it. They avoid reaching for professional help, even though they realize a need for it.

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Introduction

The pedagogical curriculum in Poland aims to prepare professionals in education, counselling and other forms of helping, targeted at various groups of clients: children and adults, individuals, groups and local communities. A professional helper or counsellor should be equipped with appropriate knowledge and skills related to the job. They should also be capable of adopting realistic and effective attitudes towards clients and towards themselves. The latter type of attitude is that towards oneself as a person and as a professional (Egan 2007, Okun 1997, Brammer 1973, Heaton 1998). Academic courses in social work and in social and job counselling focus on creating environment in which students can develop their fundamental knowledge and skills that will allow them to start their professional careers. It is also crucial that the students are inspired to develop tools of their further growth – in the personal and professional dimensions. The courses also cater for the above-mentioned attitudinal aspect of the education.

Using help of a professional counsellor, such as a psychologist or psychiatrist, is still a taboo in Poland. People are hesitant to admit using that kind of help and they use it unwillingly. Contemporary Poles tend to trivialise the problems they experience: “everyone is neurotic, nothing special about it”, “workaholism is not a disorder, it is a virtue”, “burn-out is inescapable, everyone faces it sooner or later”, etc. Job counselling evokes the most neutral of attitudes and opinions. Visiting a job counsellor bears no stigma of a psychological disorder or an inability to cope

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with life. When asked about the other domains of help, people reveal a lot of stereotypical thinking, expressed by statements as the following:

- if parents ask for help from an educational counsellor, they must be bad parents and they fail in their parental duties, or there must be something wrong with the child;
- if spouses visit a family counsellor, their marriage must be in crisis and is likely to come to an end;
- if an adult person goes to a psychologist, they must have serious problems, or they suffer from a strong psychological disorder.

Generally, admitting reliance on professional psychological help is identified socially as a mark of a dysfunction, and not as a constructive effort to solve life problems. Even the very names of Polish institutions providing help might be a barrier for potential clients: psychiatric help counsellor, addiction counselling, family problems counselling, etc. People do not want to be socially recognized as their clients. In consequence, professional counselling is delivered as the secondary or tertiary level prevention service, rather than the primary one (Leavell&Clark 1965, Gaś 2000). These voices of the contemporary Polish society justify the author's inquiry about the attitudes towards bringing help, but also, and more interestingly, towards accepting help, as displayed by the would-be professional helpers.

Research

Research objectives were as follows:

- to determine the students' knowledge about the value of seeking and accepting professional help by helpers themselves,
- to define problem areas in which students would like to accept help,
- to examine the emotional inclination of the students in the situation of their being counselling clients,
- to reveal the students' plans for using counselling.

The analyses rely on a classical definition of the attitude proposed by Smith (1947), who defines this phenomenon as composed of the cognitive, affective and behavioural layers. As for the concept of problem areas, as mentioned above, their definition and delimitation is based on the conception of life problems developed by Kulczycki (1998: 14-16), where he distinguishes between three problem groups: (1) existential problems – dealing with daily life, including professional, family and social activity-related problems as well those connected with free time and relaxation; (2) primary problems – relate to the basic conditions for realizing one's own pivotal life goals; (3) integrative problems – i.e. those of how to organize and manage one's life as a whole (and into a whole). The research is conducted locally and gathered 102 students of an MA course in education studies at UMCS in Lublin. They are regular, full-time students with their major in: (1) social work and social help; (2) personal and job counselling. The questioned students' age varies between 22 and 26. The method of diagnostic survey is used, with the technique of questionnaire. The author has developed her own questionnaire as a research tool.

Results

The diagnosis of the attitudes of the students towards their own needs for professional help and counselling begins with the examination of the cognitive, emotional and behavioural components of their attitudes.

2.1 The cognitive components of the students' attitudes towards being helped

The students' knowledge about the need to seek and accept professional help has been assessed on the basis of their curriculum. The researched students completed their classes in the following subjects: outlines of counselling, job counselling, psychological prevention, outlines of psychological therapy. Hence, they can be expected to have acquired the necessary knowledge background about the role and functioning of a professional counsellor. The students are also questioned on that matter. In their majority (90.81%), they subscribe to the view that when an adult encounters a situation which they find difficult to manage, they should seek professional help. This help is also recommended by the students to those who want to improve their functioning in general. The students agree almost

unequivocally (98.04%) that a professional helper should demonstrate a considerable degree of openness to seeking help, either in an urgent need of a moment or for one's general growth and health (see Table 1).

Table 1. The students' beliefs on the readiness of the helper to seek professional help from others

Should a professional helper be ready to seek professional help from others?	N	%
Yes, definitely	63	61.76
Yes, to some extent	37	36.28
Hard to say	2	1.96
Rather not	0	0.00
Definitely not	0	0.00
Total	102	100.0

In the area of existential problems, the students point to complications of family life, professional career, but also to life wisdom and the need to define one's own philosophy of life as those areas where they need someone to give them a hand. The resultant data are presented in the table below (Table 2).

Table 2. The areas of existential problems reported by the subjects as those in which they need help

Problem areas	N	%
Professional area Material stability; raising qualifications; professional growth; job satisfaction	51	50.00
Family life: Choice of partner; close relationship built on love; raising children	60	58.82
Social activities Engaging into social activities; working for the social well-being	7	6.86
Socializing: Engaging into acquaintance and friendship; feeling of loneliness and alienation	26	25.49
Relaxation and rest: Play; rest; time management for one's free time and relaxation periods	17	16.67
Fundamental life philosophy: Defining primary objectives whose attainment is worth commitment; defining fundamental rules of conduct to help reach life objectives	42	41.17
Life wisdom Ability to solve one's problems; reflexive-critical distance towards life; peaceful affirmation of one's life	45	44.18
No problems requiring professional counselling	33	32.35

The data do not sum up to 100 per cent since the questionnaire allowed multiple answers for each question.

As for the primary problems, relating to psychological functioning, the students find it most challenging to handle stress and overcome their own limits.

Table 3. The areas of primary problems reported by the subjects as those in which they need help

Problem areas	N	%
Stress management	96	94.12
Realistic view of life	60	58.82
Ability to act in all life conditions	34	33.33
Professional discipline, work management, time management	51	50.00
Ability to cooperate with particular people	42	41.18
Overcoming weaknesses	94	92.16
Realistic self-evaluation	84	82.36
Optimism (i.e. a considerable degree of distance to the world without resigning from effective action in the world)	72	70.59
I don't experience any of the problems mentioned above	0	0.00

The data do not sum up to 100 per cent since the questionnaire allowed multiple answers for each question.

The data collected show the subjects' relatively high level of self-awareness. They can identify those areas of their functioning where they need professional help and support. Nevertheless, the data to be presented below show that this high level of awareness does not translate onto a real readiness to seek and accept professional help. This is why the subjects can be said to display a noticeable degree of immaturity.

2.2 The emotional components of the students' attitudes towards being helped

The problems and difficulties experienced by the subjects, as presented above, cause their severe psychological discomfort. The emotional inclination towards professional counselling differs depending on the addressee. The subjects show more acceptance towards the difficulties encountered by other people, rather than to those with which they have to struggle on their own. The need to seek professional advice is associated by many subjects with the general sense of inability to cope and causes embarrassment. The students point out that if they were to make use of professional counselling, particularly psychological help, they would like to keep this strictly to themselves. A situation where their acquaintances or colleagues were to know about their use of professional help would be a source of extreme discomfort for them. The kind of help that is the least unpleasant to seek is that of a job counsellor or coach. The most difficult, on the other hand, is to ask for support of a psychiatrist or psychotherapist (see data in Table 4 below). The results presented above are not surprising, since job counsellors or coaches are not recognised socially as dealing with psychological problems or disorders.

Table 4. Emotional inclination of the subjects towards their use of professional help

Specialist helpers whose support is a source of severe discomfort and embarrassment	N	%
Job counsellor	0	0.0
Family counsellor	61	59.80
Coach	0	0.0
Psychotherapist	89	87.25
Psychiatrist	87	85.29
None of the above	8	7.84

The data do not sum up to 100 per cent since the questionnaire allowed multiple answers for each question.

2.4. The behavioural component of the students' attitudes towards being helped

Table 5 shows that 10.78 per cent of the subjects have previously taken advantage of professional counselling (Table 5). The help mostly focused around job and premarital counselling. Over one third of the students admit having been in need of professional help before, but without doing anything to seek and get it. Thus, a considerable number of the students (41.18%) fail to make use of their knowledge about the need for professional support and resist any action to seek help.

Table 5. The subjects' experience of their use of professional help

The subjects' previous use of professional help	N	%
Yes, I needed help and I used it	11	10.78
Yes, I needed help but I did not use it	42	41.18
I have had no such need so far	49	48.04

In the light of the data presented above, it seems worthwhile to ponder upon the would-be professional helpers' readiness to seek help from other professionals (see Table 6). Most of the subjects assess their readiness as average or limited. Also, one out of four subjects finds it problematic to determine their readiness to seek help. These results are not satisfying. They can be a prognosis of some future problems in the development of the subjects' careers, unless they change their way of thinking and acting.

Table 6. Readiness of the subjects to seek help

Readiness of the subjects to seek help	N	%
high	9	8.82
average	38	37.25
limited	30	29.42
Hard to say	25	24.51
Total	102	100.0

Another question concerns a planned use of professional help. It is also interesting to know if the subjects allow for the systematic use of professional counselling in their personal development plans. As for the planned use of help (Table 7), it turns out that over the half of the subjects do not intend to use any help in the future. They hope to solve their problems on their own or with help from non-professional helpers – family and friends. A considerable number of the subjects (29.41%) do not have any clear plans in this respect.

Table 7. Plans and intentions of the subjects as regards their future use of professional help

Plans and intentions to use help in solving the subjects' own problems	N	%
Definitely yes. I am sure I will seek professional help	6	5.87
Rather yes, though it will not be easy for me	14	13.73
Hard to say. I am not sure.	30	29.42
Rather not. I will try to solve them on my own or with the help of family and friends. Professional help will be the last resort.	52	50.98
Definitely not. I do not see any need for that help in the future	0	0.00
Total	102	100.00

The data presented in Table 8 below indicate that the subjects do not anticipate or plan being professionally helped in their personal development plans. This statement is true for 44.12 per cent of the subjects. One third of the researched students have problems defining their stance on this matter. One out of five declare an intention to use help in the future.

Table 8. Plans and intentions of the subjects to include the use of professional help in their personal development plan

Do you allow for being professionally helped in your personal development plan?	N	%
Yes, definitely	2	1.96
Yes, to some extent	21	20.59
Hard to say. I am not sure.	34	33.33
Rather not	20	19.61
Definitely not	25	24.51
Total	102	100.00

The data presented above provoke a question of why the majority of the would-be professional helpers fail to plan their reliance on professional help. In fact, the data makes the author ask if the subjects do have any well-defined personal development plan at all. The problem is to what extent this is a plan, rather than being an ad hoc collection of some imprecise impressions and beliefs concerning one's future life.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The research results presented hereby show that the majority of the subjects reveal incoherent attitudes towards their use of professional help. On the one hand, all the subjects possess knowledge about the importance of accepting help and they judge it as a key professional competence. On the other hand, their knowledge seems to be built around some generalized category of a helper, rather than having direct reference to each of them individually. Many subjects admit their need for professional advice, but this need is a source of psychological discomfort. Over 80 per cent of the subjects are not sure if they are likely to use professional help in the future, or they declare that they do not plan to use it at all. Finally, some claim that they may use help but only as a last resort. Even if they

decided to use help, they would definitely not like anyone to know about it. It is crucial to note that the majority of the examined students do not plan any systemic use of professional help or counselling. Neither do they put it on the list of activities to include in their personal development plan.

The attitudes of the students, as revealed in the research presented above, disclose a considerable risk of problems in their private and professional functioning. This is of paramount importance in view of the fact that the students are just about to begin their careers. One could expect a better-defined and more mature attitudes of the professionals-to-be towards their careers and their need for help from others.

Consequently, the research results highlight an urgent need to strengthen those elements of the pedagogical curriculum that can help students develop their acceptance of their need for help. The data collected show a need for an educational initiative that can help the students develop their positive attitude towards themselves as addressees of counselling and help. This attitude is indispensable for efficient functioning and professional growth in the helping professions.

Another indication that the data give is that students could greatly benefit from a counselling unit at the university, which could guarantee easy access to professional help. A major benefit of launching such a facility is that it could make students recognize the help provided by the unit as a pack and parcel of one's becoming a professional helper.

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